

How entrepreneurs were reeled in; Christopher LaVoie tapped into their desire to harness the power of social media

The Toronto Star

September 19, 2022 Monday

Copyright 2022 Toronto Star Newspapers Ltd. All Rights Reserved

Section: NEWS; Pg. A6

Length: 2407 words

Byline: Kevin Donovan Chief Investigative Reporter

Body

Part three of a five-part series. Recap of the story so far: The Montreal version of Christopher LaVoie's "change-the-world television" was never made. The 30 "contestants" describe a chaotic experience, with some being challenged to create a business to stop hurricanes and others asked to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars on camera. Yet little filming was done. Still, the experience propelled LaVoie to dream bigger and conceive "4 Days to Save the World," to be filmed in Miami in 2021. LaVoie set about looking for 250 people who blended business with a social purpose. All they had to do was pay \$25,000 - pay double and you got to be a Team Captain.

When I began looking into Christopher LaVoie's reality television shows, I encountered contestants red-faced with embarrassment. "How could I have been so dumb?" was a typical comment. Some of them are so petrified that they will lose business if their part of the story gets out that they asked not to be identified in any way.

But Niki Papaioannou is no dummy. The Toronto public relations executive is like so many of the "4 Days" contestants - smart, experienced, successful and trying to grow a business. She is out \$20,000 (all figures U.S.) and did not even get to go to Miami.

"It was a very expensive lesson," says Papaioannou.

LaVoie, who bills himself as "The Producer," tapped into the desire of many modern entrepreneurs to harness the power of social media. The thinking is, the more people are aware of what you do, the more business you attract. LaVoie began his pitch to prospective contestants by telling them they were signing on with a show that would help solve problems like hunger, poverty, racism and cancer.

"We will capture you in the process of problem solving a social issue that everyone has an emotional connection with," he said to prospective contestants. He provided his assistants with a similar script when they were speaking on his behalf.

Then the promises came.

First, if their team was selected the winner, their business would be funded by what he described as the "TSM Billion Dollar Innovation Fund." Each winner would get "four per cent" equity.

Second, in addition to being on an internationally streamed television show, he said they would each get 12 "media assets" - mini-documentaries chronicling their time on the show, which they could add to their social media feed.

The more contestants questioned whether this was a good idea, the richer the promises.

How entrepreneurs were reeled in; Christopher LaVoie tapped into their desire to harness the power of social media

"Your face is going to be on a billboard in Times Square," he told one. "We'll invest millions in your business," he told another. "People will see you differently and your bottom line will explode," one of his assistants said in her pitch.

LaVoie, in a "pitch deck" he sent to all prospective contestants, tells them: "This is much more than just a TV series. This is a mission, a cause, a fight for humanity." Then he offers contestants the chance to become part of his "global ecosystem" of investors and celebrities. Ten million people will watch this show, he says. To join up, he offers them a payment plan for the \$25,000 fee. Pay more (between \$5,000 and \$25,000 more) and they would be a Team Captain "with more time on camera and one on ones with Christopher LaVoie."

To find contestants, LaVoie relied heavily on the business platform LinkedIn, along with Instagram, WhatsApp and Facebook. For a promised commission of five to 10 per cent of what each contestant paid, his assistants trolled websites and social media looking for just the right people.

"We have to find the best people," one of LaVoie's assistants said on a call leading up to Miami. "The Golden People. They'll invest because they want to change the world."

They were looking for individuals who described themselves as socially minded, were entrepreneurs, and described themselves as "CEO" or "principal" or "founder." For example, Papaioannou's profile lists her as "founder" of her firm, Niki Inc., which "works with superstars and entrepreneurs who want to improve the state of the planet and tell their unique story."

It was a friend of Papaioannou's who was already working for LaVoie who reached out to say, "Niki, this will be perfect for you," she recalls.

At the time, Papaioannou was just recovering from stage three thyroid cancer. She and her husband had two young children, and the price tag certainly gave her pause. Still, she went for it.

"This is going to sound silly I suppose, but I am a cancer survivor and that has a lot to do with why I signed up," she says. "When I was sick in 2017 I said, if I ever get a chance to change the world, I will take it."

Somehow, LaVoie knew of her illness, and she says he used that, telling her she would inspire the "4 Days" audience by telling a story of bravery and overcoming adversity. "He said I could change the world," says Papaioannou. LaVoie used that tactic with others he courted as contestants, including Montreal contestant Til Lowery, whose son died of an accident at a young age.

It's not surprising that so many were asked to share difficult information. According to a "script" that all LaVoie assistants followed during an initial "casting call," that was part of the plan.

The script tells the assistants to let each potential contestant "talk about their past and their achievements." While assistants were encouraged to listen for 15 minutes, they were instructed to then ask "what is their dream" for their business. Next, assistants were encouraged to inquire "what their most traumatic experience was." Finally, assistants were to explain the \$25,000 fee, tell them it could be paid over 12 months or all at once.

Papaioannou paid LaVoie Entertainment \$20,000 in three instalments over two years (not \$25,000 - some paid more, some less). She never made it to Miami. Months before the scheduled trip to Florida for filming, LaVoie pared the cast to 100, telling Canadians and Europeans it was due to pandemic travel restrictions and closed borders. But Papaioannou received no refund.

Most contestants were comfortable, but not wealthy. "There are two classes of people taken in by this scheme," says Jared Yellin, a Florida businessman who did attend in Miami. "Those who went into debt to pay Christopher LaVoie, and those who had the money and it is not worth it to complain."

LaVoie and his assistants sweetened their pitches by telling contestants they had "big names" backing their show.

How entrepreneurs were reeled in; Christopher LaVoie tapped into their desire to harness the power of social media

To start off, they were told Jeff Bezos of Amazon and other extremely wealthy individuals were bankrolling the TSMX Innovation fund.

Maye Musk, the mother of SpaceX and Tesla CEO Elon Musk, was a backer. So were, they were told, actor Elijah Wood and retired NFL superstar Ray Lewis of the Baltimore Ravens.

"Oh, I told the lie," says Shari Jo Watkins, one of LaVoie's assistants, who says that at the time she made all of these promises at LaVoie's direction she thought she was being truthful. Watkins and other former assistants say they now understand that Musk, Wood and Lewis were not backing the show. She has since broken ties with LaVoie.

Watkins says she and other assistants were instructed to find 600 people for Miami 2021. "We got 247 signed up."

"I did think it was a fantastic concept, a great vision," says Watkins.

Thanks to Watkins and others who for a time worked for LaVoie, including Kevin Kempf (he worked on the Montreal show, Watkins on Miami) it's possible to pull back the curtain to see what was behind these lavish boasts made by LaVoie and the organizers.

There was no deal with any of the major streaming services, according to Watkins, Kempf and other LaVoie assistants. Still, he used their corporate logos on his formal written pitches.

As to Bezos and Amazon, they were not on board. The acronym "TSM" in "TSMX Innovation Fund" that LaVoie said was related to Bezos was actually an acronym for "The Social Movement," the name of the Montreal show that was never made.

As for the celebrities, Maye Musk was very briefly considering being involved, say Kempf and other former assistants. She even recorded a short video for LaVoie, but backed out a year before Miami, and according to LaVoie's assistants, her lawyers sent LaVoie a warning to stop using her likeness. The Star has reached out to Musk and not heard back.

Elijah Wood and Ray Lewis?

During their recorded Zoom chats that led up to Miami, each contestant was presented with a series of celebrity recordings they were told were endorsements of the "4 Days" show.

For example, potential contestants were shown Wood (he played Frodo in "The Lord of the Rings" movies, although LaVoie's assistant mistakenly tells prospective contestants "he played Harry Potter"), wearing a plain grey sweatshirt and sitting in front of a red brick wall.

"Hello Chris and everyone at The Social Movement," the actor begins. "Facing social issues such as education, racism, pandemics and other key social challenges shows the magic of the human potential. All the world needs is love, love, love. Be well."

Lewis, an NFL linebacker now in the football hall of fame, appears on screen wearing a plain black T-shirt and sitting in what appears to be a kitchen. "Chris and the entire team at the Social Movement, you are about to embark on the most important mission of your lives. Four Days to End Racism. Many blessings to you, I hope you guys can bring people together and keep people together because that's what the world needs, we need love, we need love, we need love. God bless you and everything you guys are doing."

In reality, these are Cameos - from a celebrity video service. Depending on the type of message (personal or business) and what the celebrity wants to charge, you can pay from hundreds to thousands of dollars to get a celebrity to deliver a personalized message. It's not intended to be an endorsement. The Cameos (people usually get them for a birthday or retirement party) have been skilfully edited by LaVoie to make it appear they were backing his show, according to his assistants.

How entrepreneurs were reeled in; Christopher LaVoie tapped into their desire to harness the power of social media

How much did they likely cost?

Lewis's Cameo fee currently is \$426. At the time these were recorded, Wood charged \$225. The Cameo site says he is not currently doing videos but to check back later to see if he is available.

"It was all lies," says LaVoie's former assistant, Watkins. "None of these people were really backing Chris."

The Star reached out to agents for Wood and Lewis, but has not yet heard back.

To inspire his assistants to get people to sign on to "4 Days," LaVoie offered them a 10 per cent commission. Quite often, that commission was not paid, leading the assistants to wonder where all of the money went in the end.

What was taking place when assistants were contacting people they knew to get them signed up is referred to in psychology texts as "transference of trust," and this is integral to every Ponzi or multi-level marketing scheme. Those who signed up were trusting the person who referred them, not LaVoie.

Shirin Ariff is a Toronto woman who was tapped by one of LaVoie's assistants to both be on the show and find other contestants. Ariff spoke to LaVoie and he said he would waive her "\$25,000 participation fee" if she could land 10 contestants or more. Ariff is the founder of Be Your Own North Star, a "life makeover coach" firm. She's a cancer survivor and she recalls LaVoie, in their first call, drilling into that aspect of her life.

"Chris was very respectful," she says, describing her first interaction with him. "He asked me to create a spreadsheet of my current income and taxes. He called it my TLS. My Total Life Sum. Then he asked what do you want, a cottage, a boat, an airplane. Shirin, he said, write down your dreams."

She did raise an eyebrow when he told her he was himself "provided financial advice by the accountant who advised the Queen of England." Still, she sent him personal information on her life. She was able to get several clients and contacts to join and pay the \$25,000 by instalments, something she regrets today. Ariff was not paid, since her commission was to fund her appearance as a contestant and the Canadians never made it to Miami in 2021. LaVoie said that due to the pandemic he needed to have a smaller, U.S. cast.

Many of the contestants describe LaVoie as having an almost "Svengali" like ability to get inside someone's head, a reference to the hypnotist character in the 1894 novel "Trilby."

Archie Messersmith-Bunting, a mental health educator and professional speaker, looks back on a deep conversation he had with LaVoie. How LaVoie, who knew Messersmith-Bunting had personal struggles in his life, began describing mental health challenges he said his own son had. And how LaVoie, 15 minutes into their conversation, said he would "cancel my next meeting so we can keep talking." Messersmith-Bunting, who did participate in Miami on "Team Suicide," now thinks it was all a lie.

Andrew Smith, a Florida entrepreneur who has founded two businesses that help retailers innovate, said he feels ridiculous that he was taken in by the pitch. "Chris is a salesperson. He has a way of making you feel special," says Smith. "The funny thing is over the years I have mocked people for being taken in by scammers. Now I feel like an idiot."

Others cut right to what they think is the heart of the matter based on their dealings with LaVoie.

"He mind f---s with people," says Yellin, the Florida businessman who brought 10 people on the show in return for his promise to build two applications for LaVoie, a value of \$500,000, Yellin says. He ended up only building one app, to help with the judging.

In addition to promises that being on "4 Days" would make them more successful, many of the contestants signed up because they wanted to be part of making a positive impact on the world.

How entrepreneurs were reeled in; Christopher LaVoie tapped into their desire to harness the power of social media

"It's a tantalizing prospect to start a business and save the planet," said Rob Hoehn, who is the founder of a company that helps new businesses with novel ideas find success. Hoehn, based in Seattle, describes himself as a "climate activist," and climate was one of LaVoie's challenges. In Miami, he and his team came up with a business that linked homeowners with tax credits and incentives for reducing their carbon footprint.

In Miami in June of 2021, as the teams were doing their best to come up with proposals with no direction - and few cameras - some of the more suspicious contestants began asking the same question.

"Who is Christopher LaVoie and where did he come from?"

Next: Part four - Who is Christopher LaVoie?

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Journal Code: TTA

Subject: ENTREPRENEURSHIP (89%); NEGATIVE SOCIETAL NEWS (89%); SOCIETAL ISSUES (78%); RACISM & XENOPHOBIA (73%); EMOTIONS (72%); SOCIETY, SOCIAL ASSISTANCE & LIFESTYLE (72%); HUNGER IN SOCIETY (70%); NEGATIVE NEWS (67%); POVERTY & HOMELESSNESS (50%)

Industry: MOVIE FILMING (89%); TELEVISION PROGRAMMING (89%); REALITY TELEVISION (73%); STREAMING MEDIA (72%); PUBLIC RELATIONS (71%)

Geographic: ONTARIO, CANADA (58%)

Load-Date: September 19, 2022